

## **Having Conversations with Children Learning to Talk**

By James D. MacDonald

One of the most important things in helping children learn to talk is to have frequent, friendly conversations with them. These conversations do not have to be long, or be about anything adults consider important; the goal is to keep your child interacting with you using any words he can say.

Talk about anything your child is doing or is interested in, no matter how insignificant it seems to you. Use easy words he can understand and say, then keep the conversation going as long as you both are enjoying your time together. Think of this as "practicing" conversations, the same way a child practices doing anything else.

It is common for adults to want to help, change, and teach children with delays. We often think that talking about a child's ideas is a waste of time - after all, there is so much he needs to learn! But once you get into the habit of having easy social conversations, you will see your child staying with you longer, paying more attention, and doing things more like you. A child who can stay in conversations will, in time, learn more and have the opportunities to use what he knows to learn still more and build stronger relationships with people.

Remember, your child will learn more from you if you are a play and conversation **partner**, rather than only a caretaker and "director." The following suggestions help many parents have more enjoyable, successful conversations with their children.

### **Communicate for a variety of reasons.**

Talk about anything - just don't do all the talking! If you think of conversations as making up a story or solving a problem, it is easy to let one friendly comment lead to another. Be sure to share the lead with your child. Talk sometimes about what he just said; at other times, about your own ideas. Don't end the conversation quickly by giving a superficial pat-on-the-back and saying simply, "Good talking!" Keep your child interacting by matching his ideas and words and giving him time to initiate and respond.

### **Communicate more for enjoyable social contact than to get something done.**

While there are certainly times to get things done, they are not frequent enough for your child to learn language and conversation. Research in early language development and our clinical experience shows that the more adults teach in directive ways, the more passive and less social the children become. When parents and other adults become more of a "partner" and less of a "boss" during conversations, children enjoy the time more and stay interacting longer.

**Comment and wait.**

When you comment, just express what you think and see without demanding a particular response from your child. Comments are valuable because children cannot fail or give a wrong answer as they might if you ask questions. Any response the child makes is a "success" and can keep the conversation going if you follow your child's lead.

Talk about the things you both know about and what you are doing at the moment. communicate in ways your child does using similar sounds and words. He will more likely stay with you and begin to communicate more like you.

**Reply to your child's comments.**

Without our continued attention, many children are not likely to get into a habit of talking with others. They often use their talk mainly to play alone. Even if your child spends a lot of time talking to himself, you can respond to his words and ideas and show him his talk gets your attention.

Avoid the habit of accepting or listening to any child talk, without responding to it. Consider your own spontaneous replies as the "fuel" that keeps your child communicating.

**Keep conversation balanced.**

It is normal for children to talk mainly about themselves, but it is important for them to talk about other's ideas as well. Help your child be accepted by society by learning to talk about other's interests as well as their own.

**Think of talking as creative play.**

Unless a child feels free of judgment and failure in an interaction, he is not likely to communicate much of what he knows. Enjoy watching and hearing your child create new ideas. When your child feels free to express his thoughts, he will be more interesting to you and others.

**Follow rules of social conversations.**

When your child is in the habit of having conversations, you can then start to show him the basic rules society will expect from him. Some of those are: communicate for a response; wait silently, responding to the other person's intent; be clear about what he means and change his words if not understood.

At the same time, show your child what not to do in conversations: Don't interrupt; don't ignore the other's message; don't ramble; don't communicate only to yourself; don't change the topic abruptly; and don't fail to clarify when you are not understood.

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*This article can be found at: [www.comeunity.com/disability/speech/conversations.html](http://www.comeunity.com/disability/speech/conversations.html).*